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W. T. STACE has had two careers, one in the British Civil Service in Ceylon (1910–1932) and another as a professor in philosophy at Princeton University (retired in June, 1955). Professor Stace was born in London and was educated in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Among the many books on philosophical subjects which he has written, the titles mentioned here suggest the broad scope of his inquiring mind: *Critical History of Greek Philosophy* (1920), *Philosophy of Hegel* (1924), *Meaning of Beauty* (1929), *Theory of Knowledge and Existence* (1932), *The Destiny of Western Man* (1942), and *Time and Eternity* (1952).

THE SNOBBISHNESS OF THE LEARNED

by W. T. STACE

THERE is a story told of a very well known living writer who produced a popular book on a branch of modern science – one of the best books of its kind now in print. He is said to have submitted his manuscript for criticism to a fellow expert, who, having read it, tossed it back contemptuously, saying, "You understand thoroughly the subject on which you are writing, and I have no adverse criticisms to offer. But why do you waste your time writing stuff of this sort?"

The story is quite possibly apocryphal. But that such a story can be passed round, and gain credence, illustrates very forcibly the fact that there is among learned men a widespread tendency to look down upon popular writing as something not worthy of their serious consideration, as something to be despised and discouraged.

On the face of it, this would seem to be an extraordinary attitude. That the discoveries made by men of science and the world conceptions of philosophers should be made as widely known as possible would be, one might expect, their especial desire. And how else can this be done, if not by translating their thought from the technical jargon in which it is apt to be expressed into plain English which the world can understand? How else can it be done, in fact, if not by the labors of the popular writer? It would seem obvious that the widespread dissemination of knowledge already attained is of at least equal importance with the discovery of new knowledge. For what, in the end, is the value of knowledge? His acquisition of knowledge is, to the expert, often an end in itself. He may be uninterested in its subsequent

influence on the world. And it is quite right, and even necessary, that there should be men who take this point of view. The advance of knowledge mostly depends upon such men. But the matter, after all, cannot end there. To many others, discovery is of value because of the practical benefits which it confers upon mankind, as when pure science is applied to the extermination of disease or the invention of useful implements. But I would suggest that the supreme value of knowledge lies, not in the thrill which its discovery gives to the small band of experts, nor even in its practical usefulness, but in the enlargement and ennoblement of the human mind in general of which it is the cause.

Of the human mind *in general.* That means the minds, not of a few experts, but of the multitudes of civilized humanity. This has certainly been the case with the greatest discoveries of science. They have revolutionized human conceptions of the universe, given men at large a vaster sweep of mind; and it is this which has constituted their chief importance. The greatness of the Copernican hypothesis lay neither in its purely theoretical value for the scientist nor in the better application of astronomy to navigation or other practical affairs to which it may have contributed, but in the fact that it gave to mankind some conception of the immensity of the universe in which we live, and that it destroyed forever the petty views, the insolence, the self-conceit inevitably connected with the belief that the whole creation exists for, and revolves around, man.

This is why the Copernican theory constituted a revolution in human thought. This is why it is so vastly more important than, shall we say, the discovery of a new variety of ant, or of a new theorem in mathematics. Exactly similar remarks might be made about the theory of evolution. That too obtains its importance neither from its theoretical nor from its immediately practical bearings, but from its influence upon man's general conceptions of the world.

Thus what makes the difference between an important and a trivial scientific or philosophical discovery is precisely the influence which it exerts upon mankind in general, not upon the minds of a few learned men. And that is why, in philosophy, however interesting such a subject as symbolic logic may be to a few experts, it sinks into triviality beside the world conceptions of a Plato or a Kant. It is in itself a mere intellectual plaything, nothing of real importance, though it may become of importance if it can be applied to the solution of the great problems of philosophy. And it will be noted that it is precisely this trivial kind of subject which *cannot* be popularized.

In truth it matters little what the doctors of science or the doctors

of philosophy think, believe, or say among themselves in their cloisters. What humanity thinks and believes – that is what matters. And the true function of the cloistered few is precisely to be the intellectual leaders of humanity and to guide the thought of mankind to higher levels. This function can only be carried out if *someone,* either they themselves or others, will translate their thought from technical language into the language of the market place. The best and the ablest discoverers and thinkers often possess both the ability and the desire to do this themselves. (It is worth noting that Einstein is the author of a *popular* book on relativity.) Or if their talents are not of the kind required for successful popular writing, it can be done by men who make a special business of spreading broadcast the best knowledge of their age. This type of popularizer is the liaison officer between the world's thinkers and mankind at large. Thus it appears that the function of the popular writer is profoundly important and responsible.

It is related that the soul of a dead man was conducted by Saint Peter on a tour of inspection of the Heavenly City. After seeing all the marvelous glories of the Lord, and the millions of white-clad worshiping souls, he was shown by his guide a little curtained-off enclosure in which half a dozen people were praying, cut off from all the rest of the multitude. These, he was told, were the Plymouth Brethren, who believed themselves to be the only people in Heaven. Those experts who look down upon the popularization, and who would, if they could, make all knowledge the exclusive property of a little coterie of intellectuals, show a spirit identical with that of the poor souls in the story.

But, it will be said, much, if not most, of what learned men think and discover *cannot* be made intelligible to the masses. This is, on the whole, untrue. The big conceptions, the important results of science and philosophy, *can* be communicated to the layman. What cannot be communicated is, as a rule, the detailed processes of discovery and argumentation which have led to those results. Every educated person now understands the main conceptions involved in the Copernican and Darwinian hypotheses, although the proofs and details may be a sealed book to the majority.

In a tube of antityphoid serum there are so many millions of dead bacteria. The methods by which the number is counted or calculated may remain a mystery to the layman. But the fact that there *are* these many can be understood by a child. The same principle holds true even in those sciences which seem to most of us too hopelessly mathematical. The *results* reached can usually be disentangled from their mathematical formulation and set forth by themselves. This is not true,

of course, of pure mathematics itself, but only of those physical sciences which use mathematics as a mere instrument to reach their conclusions. And this is, after all, what one would expect. For mathematics is not itself knowledge at all. It is an instrument for obtaining knowledge. The actuary makes use of higher mathematics which no one except the expert can follow. But the resulting knowledge which he obtains is intelligible to everyone. The astronomer uses mathematics to calculate an eclipse, but none is required to understand his final prediction. And it is not fundamentally different with relativity. To think otherwise is like supposing that one cannot appreciate the scenery of Niagara Falls without understanding the mechanism of the railway locomotive which conveys one there.

Mathematics, said a famous writer, is a science of which the meanest intellect is capable. The statement by no means reflects, as one might be inclined to think, the mere partisan prejudice of a one-sided and narrow intelligence. There is a real truth in it.

It is obviously false if it is understood to mean that a stupid man can be a good mathematician. For plainly it is only a very clever man indeed who can be first-class in this, as in any other, subject. But his intellect may nevertheless be, and indeed is, mean if he is incapable of doing anything with it except juggling with symbols – however cleverly he may do this. For mathematics, as I said before, is not knowledge, but only an instrument for obtaining knowledge. A Newton or an Einstein uses mathematics to help him to reach out to great and grand conceptions of the Universe. This employment of mathematics as an instrument of general culture is the work of noble, and not of mean, intellects. But in so far as it cares for nothing save its own internal affairs, is without effect upon general culture, is a mere manipulation of symbols for their own sakes, it certainly can be cultivated, and successfully cultivated, by mean minds – that is, by minds which know nothing of, and care nothing for, what is really great in human culture.

It is because mathematics is a *means*, and not an *end*, that a purely mathematical education is a bad education – or, rather, no education at all. For the true purpose of education is to teach men what things in life are genuinely valuable. That is, it is concerned with ends. Therefore education ought not to concentrate upon means. They are a secondary matter. The true order is to learn first what to aim at, and then only what are the instrumentalities by which we may attain our ends. Mathematics, accordingly, should be part of a subsequent technical training. Thus the now old-fashioned preference for a classical – which really meant a humanistic – over a mathematical education,

although it may have degenerated into a prejudice or even a pig-headed obscurantism, was originally rooted in a true insight.

The impression that philosophical and scientific ideas cannot be explained in plain language to plain people is also in large measure due to the fact that philosophers and men of science have not, as a rule, the wit to do it. It is due, in plain terms, to the stupidity of the learned men, not to the stupidity of humanity. They lack the mental flexibility and adroitness which are required if they are to come out of their hiding places in the laboratory and the library and make themselves intelligible in the big world of men. They can speak only one language, the language of cast-iron technical formulas. Change the language, take away from them their technical terms and symbols, and they no longer know where they are. They are like those inferior boxers who can only box according to the rules and are nonplused by anyone who disregards them and fights as the light of nature teaches him. They lack too that human sympathy with simple people which is also essential if the teachings of science and philosophy are to be made available to the many. They cannot move with ease in the world of men. And these too are the reasons why erudite men, great figures in their own secluded world, are so often observed to behave like buffaloes in society.

II

THE contemptuous attitude toward popular writing so often affected by learned men is, then, nothing but an unwarranted prejudice. And it may not be uninteresting to inquire into its psychological motivation. May I be allowed to recommend to the reader that, whenever in this human world he finds a totally unreasonable opinion adopted by large bodies of people, he make a practice of looking, not for *reasons*, but for *motives*. He will thus save himself much time which might otherwise be wasted in searching for rationality where none exists.

Why, then, do so many workers in intellectual fields look askance at any attempt to make the results of their labors intelligible to the world at large? It is true that some apparently plausible reasons may be urged. Popular writers tend to develop certain characteristic faults. Cheap cleverness not infrequently mars their writings. And they are apt to slur over difficult and profound conceptions, and to substitute superficialities – because they have not the gift of being both simple and profound at the same time. Thus a writer on Aristotle, who wished to make easy for his readers that philosopher's teleological conception

of the cause of motion, wrote that in Aristotle's view "'tis love, 'tis love that makes the world go round." *

But a moment's thought should be sufficient to convince one that these facts afford no basis whatever for a general contempt of popular writing. Popular writers may often be cheap and shallow. But to entertain a prejudice against popular writing because some popular writers are bad is like condemning all books because of the existence of certain inferior authors.

The real ground for the disfavor in which popular writing is held among experts is to be found elsewhere. It is rooted in class prejudice. The learned think themselves superior to the common herd. They are a priestly caste imbued with the snobbishness that is characteristic of caste systems. Their learning is the mark of their superiority. It must be kept within the limits of their own class. And the means by which this is accomplished consists in a learned language of long words and technical terms. Anyone who translates knowledge from the technical into the popular language is disregarding the rules of caste, and is thus taboo. Technical terms, long words, learned-sounding phrases, are the means by which second-rate intellectuals "inflate their egos" and feed their sense of superiority to the multitude. If an idea can be expressed in two ways, one of which involves a barbarous technical jargon, while the other needs nothing but a few simple words of one syllable which everyone can understand, this kind of person definitely prefers the barbarous technical jargon. He wishes to be thought, and above all to think himself, a person who understands profound and difficult things which common folk cannot comprehend. He wishes to feel himself cleverer than other people. The long words and clumsy phrases with which he encumbers the simplest thought are the badges of his class superiority. And as this kind of person is always in a majority in any large assembly of intellectuals, a definite prejudice against popular writing is engendered.

The poorer a man's intellectual equipment, the more does he revel in technicalities. A man with a wealth of valuable ideas is anxious to communicate those ideas, and will naturally tend to choose for that purpose the simplest language he can find. But a man whose intel-

* Obviously, it is not possible to explain Aristotle's teleological conception of the cause of motion in a short footnote. It may help, however, to know that Aristotle believed that since every motion presupposes a motive principle, one must assume the existence of a first motive force which is itself unmoved. This first motive force he calls The First Cause, or *primum mobile*, which he equates with absolute reality, or God. Since God is the ultimate source of all motion, and since God is also the object of desire, "'tis love that makes the world go round." The serious student will find a more satisfactory explanation in a good encyclopedia or in a history of philosophy.

lectuality is a sham, and who has in truth nothing to communicate, endeavors to conceal his emptiness by an outward show of learning. The more unintelligible his language, the more profound will he appear to himself and (he hopes) to others. He fails to see that the love of long words and technical terms is in fact nothing but a symptom of his mental infirmity. It is a kind of intellectual disease. And perhaps those who suffer from this disease would like to have a technical term for their own malady. I will therefore make them a present of a new long word. I will christen their disease *macronomatamania.*

III

IT IS true that a few really great men, such as Immanuel Kant, have seemed to revel unnecessarily in technicalities. But let not all the macronomatamaniacs of the world attempt to shelter themselves under Kant's umbrella. Kant was great in spite of his obscure language, not because of it. And one does not become great by aping the weaknesses of a great man.

It is true, too, that technical terms are a necessity. In many branches of knowledge one cannot do without them. This is especially true in science. And it is true (but in a much lesser degree) in philosophy. About their use in science I will say nothing at all. Even regarding their use in philosophy I will not attempt in this place to say *what* their legitimate functions are, nor legislate as to where they should be used and where avoided. For that would be itself a technical inquiry, not suitable to this paper. I will, however, set down what I regard as an elementary first principle of a good style in philosophical writing. It is this: *Never use a technical term when a simple nontechnical word or phrase will equally well express your meaning.* And I would add as a gloss: *Cultivate in yourself a dislike and suspicion of all learned-sounding words and technical terms, a habit of regarding them not as fine things, but at best as necessary evils.* This will come easily to anyone naturally endowed with a hatred of humbug, and also to anyone with an artistic sense of the beauty and value of words; and the result of it will be that, whenever a technical term springs to the writer's mind, he will instinctively cast about to see whether he cannot replace it by plain English. Sometimes it will happen that he cannot do so without prejudice to his meaning. But often it will happen that he can.

I think that these principles should be applied, not only to popular writing in the usual sense, but to *all* philosophical writing of whatever sort, even that which is written by experts for experts. For the use of

a good style and of plain decent English will always facilitate the communication of meaning, to whomsoever it is addressed. And if anyone asks for an example of a good philosophical style, of the kind I have in mind, I would point to the writings of Mr. Bertrand Russell as showing the best philosophical style of the present day. Mr. Russell, of course, uses technical terms, plenty of them; but never, I think, where they could reasonably have been avoided.

A technical term as such is, anywhere and everywhere, a barbarism, an eyesore, an offense to the soul, a thing to be shuddered at and avoided. Macronomatamaniacs, therefore, are not only to be suspected of emptiness, but also to be accused of lack of taste. When a man uses a hideous jumble of technical terms where he could use plain English words, he writes himself down as a person without the sense of the beauty and dignity of language.

After all, the issue is a simple one. Do you wish to communicate thought? Or are you impelled by some other motive – to appear clever, to boost yourself up as a highbrow, to impress the simple-minded with your superiority, or what not? If you write an article or a book, your sole motive *ought* to be to communicate what you conceive to be truth to as many people as possible. If a writer is governed by this motive, it is inevitable that he will express himself in the simplest language which he can possibly find. And if, in addition to this sincerity, he has also some sense of the beauty of language, he will choose short, sharp, simple, expressive words in preference to long, uncouth, and clumsy ones. He will not, for example, write "ratiocination" when all he means is "reasoning," nor "dianoetic" when the word "intellectual" would do just as well.

Unfortunately, however, to communicate ideas is by no means the most usual motive for writing books. And if a man writes because he thinks himself a superior person, and wishes to impose this same delusion upon other people, he tends to make his style as obscure and difficult as possible. He hopes that his obscurity will be mistaken for profundity. He will write, if he can, in a learned language instead of a simple one. He will prefer big words to little ones, and a barbarous technical jargon to plain English. And the American custom of forcing university professors to "produce" (that is, to write books), and of practically making their promotion in their profession depend upon their doing so, is responsible for no little evil in this matter. Not only does it result in the publication of floods of inferior books, which the world would be much better without; not only does it compel men who have no taste for writing, and no gift for it, to waste their time writing bad books when, if left alone, they might have made admirable

and even great teachers; but it also demoralizes style, and develops macronomatamaniacs. For the man who has nothing to say worthy of publication is encouraged, almost compelled, to conceal his lack under a smoke screen of technicalities and obscure verbiage. He has to convince his university superiors of his intellectuality; and since he cannot do this by the inner worth of his thought, he must do it by putting out a spurious and pretentious conglomeration of learned-sounding words.

How easily this succeeds, how easily the world (including the learned world) is gulled by long words, the following incident may serve to illustrate. Years ago, in a certain university, there flourished a "Philosophical Society," in which the tendency to read papers couched in obscure and unintelligible language became rampant. A brilliant Irishman, wishing to prick the bubble, read before the society a paper called "The Spirit of the Age." In this paper there was not a single paragraph, not a single sentence even, which possessed, or was intended by the author to possess, the faintest glimmer of meaning. It was full of long words, of loud-mouthed phrases, of swelling periods. It *sounded* magnificent; it *meant* nothing. The society listened to it in rapt attention. Not one of the members perceived that the society was being fooled; and a long and learned discussion followed, in which not one of the members admitted that he had not understood the paper.

A man may write whole books of what is either totally meaningless or palpably false, and may secure by doing so a wide reputation, provided only that he uses long enough words. For example, the thought that there is no such thing as thought is self-contradictory nonsense. But if a man wraps up this same nonsense in a learned-sounding hocus-pocus about reflex arcs and conditioned reflexes, if he talks enough about neurons and the neural processes, and if he interlards his whole discourse with the technical terms of physiology, he may become the founder of a school of psychology, and stands a good chance of earning an enormous salary.

IV

BUT to come back to popular writing and its place in the world of learning. I would contend for two positions. First, the works of the pure popularizer — the man who has nothing of his own to say, but who popularizes other people's thoughts — is of the utmost importance. So far from being despised, he ought to be regarded as performing an absolutely vital function in the intellectual progress of man-

kind. And it is perfectly possible for him to be popular without being either shallow or cheap. Secondly, I would urge that, in a sense, *all* writing, even of the most original, learned, and abstruse kinds, should aim at being popular *as far as possible.* That such writing can always be made entirely suitable for the general reader is not for a moment contended. But the writer can at least aim at using technical terms as sparingly as possible, at avoiding unnecessary jargon, at expressing himself as simply and clearly as he can – even as beautifully as the nature of his subject permits. He can surely avoid giving the reader the feeling that he positively likes ugly words, that he revels in unintelligibilities, that he dotes on gibberish. Most readers will be grateful to him if they feel that he is at least trying to make some meaning clear to them, and not merely to stun, intimidate, and befuddle them with his cleverness. His writing will be popular in the only sense – and in the best sense – in which this can be demanded of him.

Nearly all the great philosophers of the English tradition have been in this sense popular writers, though I am afraid that the same cannot be said of the Germans. The style of Locke is lucid, if pedestrian; of both Berkeley and Hume beautiful in the extreme; of Mill clear and simple, though undistinguished and marred by some affectations; of Spencer perfectly lucid in spite of the "hurdy-gurdy monotony of him." William James, the greatest of American philosophers, had an absolute genius for graphic, telling, and brilliant English phrases. And of living writers, as I have already said, Mr. Russell's style is the best, and is a standing example of the fact that philosophy, and original philosophy too, can be written in plain English with an absolute minimum of technical terms.

QUESTIONS

1. Identify the three distinct answers which Stace gives to his own question in the third paragraph of Section 1, "For what, in the end, is the value of knowledge?" Why are these answers listed in the particular order in which they occur?

2. According to Stace, what constitutes the chief importance of great scientific discoveries? Why does he mention the Copernican theory?

3. What does the author say is the function of the popular writer? What can the popular writer do successfully? What can he not do successfully? Why does Stace emphasize the limitations of the popular writer's powers?

4. How does the extensive discussion of mathematics in Section I (the four paragraphs beginning on page 96 with "In a tube of antityphoid . . .") relate to the major design of the essay?

5. What motives does Stace attribute to the learned men who are contemptuous of popular writing? Clearly, Stace intends the reader to respond unsympathetically to these learned men. How does his use of language in Section II contribute to this intention?

6. What relationship between language and intellect does Stace stress in the last paragraph of Section II? What sort of response does he intend his use of the word *macronomatamania* (the last word in Section II) to arouse in the reader?

7. In referring to the elementary first principle of a good style in philosophical writing (Paragraph 2, Section III), Stace says, "This will come easily to anyone naturally endowed with a hatred of humbug, and also to anyone with an artistic sense of the beauty and value of words; and the result of it will be that, whenever a technical term springs to the writer's mind, he will instinctively cast about to see whether he cannot replace it by plain English." Study closely the words and phrases of this sentence and point out the effect which they are designed to have on the reader. Why does Stace strive to create such an effect?

8. Identify the author's two main contentions in the concluding section of the essay. Relate the purpose of each previous section to the contentions of the conclusion.